

# Is it Time to Stop Driving?

A sensitive guide for  
caregivers of  
people with Alzheimer's  
and related disorders.

Published jointly by the Maryland Motor Vehicle  
Administration and the Maryland Chapters of the  
Alzheimer's Association.



## **What is Alzheimer's Disease?**

Alzheimer's disease is a progressive, degenerative disease that attacks the brain and results in memory loss, impaired thinking and behavioral and personality changes. It affects an estimated 4 million Americans, including 70,000 Marylanders. Its progression varies from person to person. At present, there is no single standard test to determine if a person with Alzheimer's is able to drive.

## **Is it time to stop driving?**

People with Alzheimer's who continue to drive can be a danger to themselves and their passengers. They can also threaten unsuspecting fellow drivers. An individual's ability to drive can change from day to day when Alzheimer's strikes. A driver who seemed able to cope one day may be impaired the next. Police reports show that people with Alzheimer's are often involved in fatal accidents.

## **How does Alzheimer's impact safe driving?**

Alzheimer's can cause a number of problems for the driver, including:

- Memory loss.
- An inability to perform routine tasks.
- Impaired judgement.
- Disorientation related to time or place.
- An impaired visual and spatial perception.
- Slow reaction time.
- A diminished attention span.
- An inability to recognize cues, such as stop signs, traffic lights, or the police.

**If a person with Alzheimer's experiences one or more of the following problems, it may be time to limit or stop driving.**

- Gets lost while driving in a familiar location
- Takes longer than usual when driving alone to and from familiar places, and then denies being lost
- Drives at inappropriate speeds
- Fails to observe traffic signs and signals
- Becomes angry, frustrated or confused when driving
- Gets involved in or causes accidents, including "fender benders" or "close calls"

**How do you take action when you think someone with Alzheimer's should stop driving.**

### **Family members:**

Family members have several options, and more than one may be attempted. Being sensitive to the fact that one often feels a great loss when he or she gives up driving, will go a long way toward achieving the goal of getting someone with Alzheimer's off the road.

Plan what you say and solicit the support of the patient's physician or health care provider.

- Encourage the person to stop driving voluntarily. Prepare in advance how to meet the person's need to drive with assurances that a ride will be available when needed. It may also be helpful to try to explain to the person with Alzheimer's that his or her memory is impaired, and that it is no longer safe for them to drive.

- Many family members have been successful in getting a person with Alzheimer's to stop driving by simply asking, "Would you allow your grandchild to ride with you?"
- Though a more direct approach to the task may be taking the car keys away, a family member should avoid long explanations about why driving is no longer an option for a person with Alzheimer's. Focus, instead, on other activities the person may still be able to enjoy.
- Talk with the doctor about your concerns for the person with Alzheimer's ability to drive. Most people will listen to their doctor. Ask them to advise the person with Alzheimer's to reduce their driving, go for a driving evaluation or test, or stop driving altogether.
- If there is no treating physician for the person with Alzheimer's, contact the Motor Vehicle Administration's Medical Advisory Board at 6100 Ritchie Highway, N.E., Glen Burnie, Maryland 21062 at (410) 768-7681 for a reexamination of the driver. A phone call or letter from a family member is acceptable and strictly confidential. Please include a short description of the driving problems or any incidents that have been observed that are of concern.

### **The physician:**

The doctor of the person with Alzheimer's can assist the family with the task of removing the Alzheimer's patient from the roadways, especially if the family solicits or needs the doctor's help.

- When you are taking the medical history, ask if the person is driving. Consider the degree of insight or denial when you are inquiring about their recent driving record. It may also be helpful to obtain any historical information from family members.
- If you encourage the person to voluntarily stop driving, “prescribe” it, in writing, on a prescription pad. It should also be documented on the patient’s chart that you have discussed with the patient their need to stop driving, and your concerns need to be sent in writing to the Maryland Motor Vehicle Administration. You or a family member may contact the Motor Vehicle Administration to get the person with Alzheimer’s evaluated.

## **The Maryland Motor Vehicle Administration:**

The Maryland Motor Vehicle Administration will work with you and the person with Alzheimer’s. The MVA’s Medical Advisory Board is committed to helping people drive as long as they can do it safely. The family member’s referral will start a request for more information on the medical condition from the doctor, driver and family. Additional screening tests to determine the person with Alzheimer’s fitness to drive, including a “behind the wheel” test may be conducted. Maryland’s law grants immunity to any reporting physician for a good faith submission.



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